

## Letters and Lectures

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*The two parts of the present text correspond to our presentation held in May at the 2012 EWCA conference at the American University of Bulgaria in Blagoevgrad and can be considered as two heterogeneous essays circling around a common question - What can literature teach about writing? This joint effort tries to highlight the theory in writing as a practice. Whereas the first part tends to focus on the language in which we account for/think about our writing and proposes an alternative metaphor coined by Flaubert, the second one derives from Kleist's Essay a model of the coincidence between reading, thinking and writing.*

### Letters and Lectures I: Crossing the Desert with Flaubert

♣ Matthias Preuss

#### The Experience of Failure

In a survey conducted at the University of Freiburg in Germany more than 80 % of the respondents claimed they had faced writing "problems" in the past. One aspect that seems striking about this result is that most people believed that their "problems" rooted in individual failure (cf. Gaul / Rapp / Zschau 2008). This quick assignment of guilt seems to be the result of an intuitive understanding of writing that does not take into account the basic problematic character of writing.

Writing processes tend to get lost in the big picture of academia and students mostly write in isolation. Thus the writing socialization at the universities cannot reshape this understanding. A common fiction arises from this: Writing has to happen in a *natural* way - like water following gravity from the mountaintop to the sea. Consequently, such writing is often referred to in water metaphors such as "stream", "flow", and "blockade". The writer is supposed to conceive an idea first, which then naturally forces its way out. Knowledge streams out of its "brain-source" and onto the blank pages taking the form of a scientific paper.

What is blocked out of the area (or even better: of the arena) of

academic writing, shall be discussed here with the help of literary texts which will serve as crystallization points for further reflection on writing processes. Following Ulrike Lange's proposal to work with metafictional texts in writing didactics (cf. Lange 2008), I will analyze the writing situation of Gustave Flaubert - who is considered as one of the major European novelist and is known for his almost obsessive devotion to style.

What surfaces in the *metawriting* of Flaubert, will be described with the help of the vocabulary of Gisbert Keseling who distinguishes different kinds of writing blockades and suggests possible solutions to keep up the flow. Furthermore, it will be situated within the typology of writing strategies developed by Hanspeter Ortner. For the latter, the simultaneity of thinking and writing processes is crucial. It will become obvious that the concept of writing as a simple expression of developed thought is a misconception that cannot be maintained. Even Flaubert's masterly writing is paradoxical in its very foundations. Maybe we can sketch an alternative understanding of writing and by doing so pave the way for students to work on their own academic writing. Writing is a craft - it can and has to be learned. Writing is also already a way of thinking. From this perspective, every act of writing is a failure - always outdated as it is a mere snapshot of an ever ongoing process of simultaneous writing-thinking. Speaking about writing "problems" is a perfect tautology: Thinking can only take place within the gravity field of problems.

### **Killing the King: Exit Ghost**

In 1951 the German poet Gottfried Benn claimed that a poem does not simply come into existence but that it is carefully *crafted*<sup>1</sup>. Looking for a documentation of writing processes in an academic context, one could easily get the impression that texts indeed simply come into existence somehow.<sup>2</sup> Academic writing seems to be haunted by a ghost that resembles the romanticist genius: An ingenious scholar struck by a flash of inspiration simply putting down

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<sup>1</sup>"Ein Gedicht entsteht überhaupt sehr selten - ein Gedicht wird gemacht." (Benn 2004: 10).

<sup>2</sup>Lange makes a similar observation (cf. Lange 2008). Of course there are exceptions - mostly in the domains of ethnography and writing studies.

his thoughts on paper without hesitation, without deviation, in a straight-forward manner. Maybe this is the reason for the curious discourse about the *flow* of writing, and of *blockades* or *dams*. "Normal" writing is supposed to be like a force of nature - like a river - irresistibly forcing its way through.

Academic texts are doomed to silence with regard to their own genesis, whereas fictional texts are quite often most eloquent witnesses of their own formation. Therefore, Ulrike Lange proposes to deal with literature in order to tackle writing "problems" experienced in academic contexts. Whereas the writing process generally is a taboo in scientific publications, literature is a space where writers usually reflect on their writing (cf. Lange 2008) - especially in the *genre* of metafiction, a class of texts that address their own genesis as a subject and thus render the writing processes visible. However, the reflection does not always take place in the primary text. Frequently it is moved to paratexts surrounding the final work. Poetological writings, letters, drafts and different versions document the development of a literary text and can be considered as *external* metawriting.

This is the common ground shared by literary studies and writing didactics: *metawriting* occupies the blind spot that the academic enterprise produces by ostracizing self-reflexive writing. A critical assessment of the writing processes by canonic authors can undermine the fiction of an ideal, unproblematic writing. This might be a solution to the feeling of individual failure many students face, that can only develop in the light of a radically simplified concept of writing. By discussing texts and writing processes of other writers, students can gain a new perspective on their own writing circumventing psychological resistance. Consequently, the symbiosis of literary studies and writing didactics that is hereby proposed, is a strategic move itself.

### **Flauberts Letters: Maze, Satanic Prose & *Mot Juste***

Everybody who wants to write an academic paper sets foot into an immense, never-ending library that somehow has to be *handled*. Potential sources have to be found, chosen, evaluated and proces-

sed - and every text is connected to many others.<sup>3</sup> While working on his last novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* Flaubert tried to overcome this maze. His protagonists study all the fields of human knowledge - constantly failing to transform theory into practice. Flaubert even outpaces his character in his attempt to measure the totality of scientific knowledge in order to arrange its fragments and write them into a satirical encyclopedia. While composing the novel, Flaubert consumed the textual sediments of all sciences -his private library contained more than 1700 volumes.<sup>4</sup> The novel's substrate is an abundance of scientific facts carefully condensed from excessive research.<sup>5</sup> Flaubert realizes that the textual network that is called library is inexhaustible, but nevertheless tries to conquer it with paradoxical effort. In a letter he writes: "I am afraid of what I have to do for Bouvard et Pécuchet. I am reading whole catalogs of books that I annotate."<sup>6\*</sup> Flaubert pictures himself in the middle of a desperate infinite regress. "But reading is like an abyss - one cannot escape it."<sup>7\*</sup> With every new book I open, thousand others spring up! I am, Monsieur, in a maze!<sup>8\*</sup> Every time Flaubert begins to research systematically, he entangles himself in a web of textual references. At this point, the relation between Flaubert's work and academic writing becomes obvious - Flaubert's labor is connected to the scientist's lab. Thomas Mann said that the modern novel contains the "application of the scientific to the completely nonscientific as the purest expression of irony."<sup>9\*</sup> Flaubert's statements suggest that

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<sup>3</sup>A striking description of this maze can be found in Borges *La biblioteca de Babel*.

<sup>4</sup>For an inventory of Flaubert's library see Leclerc 2001.

<sup>5</sup>"[Bouvard et Pécuchet was] distilled from 11,000 pages of notes. It is a book made of facts and facts reduced, by every artifice Flaubert could devise, to an extraordinary blank plane of autonomous factuality; and it was finally to spew forth again its own sources, summarized, digested, annotated." (Kenner 2005: 28).

<sup>6\*</sup> (Quotes marked with an asterisk are my own translation. I will give the original passages in the footnotes). "Moi je suis effrayé de ce que j'ai à faire pour *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Je lis des catalogues de livres que j'annote." (Flaubert 1930: 412).

<sup>7\*</sup> "Mais la lecture est un gouffre; on n'en sort pas." (Flaubert 1927: 228).

<sup>8\*</sup> "[À] chaque lecture nouvelle, mille autres surgissent! je suis, Monsieur, dans un dédale!" (Flaubert 1927: 214)

<sup>9\*</sup> "Anwendung des Wissenschaftlichen auf das ganz Unwissenschaftliche, und

the uncontested master of his trade struggles with profane writing problems.

Flaubert is reduced to severe despair due to his inability to find a *natural* end for his novel. "That's what is diabolic about prose - that it is never finished."<sup>10\*</sup> What becomes the structure of the novel in Flaubert - going beyond the pattern of a developing plot crowned by a solution in favor of splitting up the plot into repetitive episodes - could be called a writing "problem". From another perspective it is the discovery of the cyclic and recursive character of writing (cf. Gaul / Rapp / Zschau 2008: 4). The presumed linear flow transforms into an ongoing tidal oscillation.

Maurice Blanchot reads the "signature of torment" in Flaubert's metawriting. Flaubert conducted his prose project with desperate effort - in Blanchot's words: "The only thing that asserts itself is the disproportion of an absurd passion or the unreason of an unworking labor" (Blanchot 1993: 332). His writing is driven by the mania to find the perfect expressions that *style* consists of - but to sustain the idea of a genuine way of expression, i.e. the unique style of a writer, in a textual universe of constantly pre-used phrases turns out to be a deranging task. He suffers trying to find the right word - *le mot juste*. "My work progresses very slowly, he writes, every time I have to endure veritable tortures just to write down a simple sentence."<sup>11\*</sup> Blanchot argues that Flaubert wants to overcome chance by perfect form. "[H]is search for form [...] responds to what is arbitrary - to the risk, the chance - in all speech, that is, to its essentially problematic character." (Blanchot 1993: 332).

## Of Strategy and Arid Writing

Flaubert's quest for the right word could be described in Keseling's vocabulary as interruption of the phrasing process (*Störung des Formulierungsprozesses*). This form of blockade is characterized by the following features: Very slow phrasing in general, permanent editing of the text already written, experiencing writing as a torment, strug-

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eben dies als den reinsten Ausdruck der Ironie" (Blumenberg 1969: 25).

<sup>10\*</sup> "Voilà ce que la prose a de diabolique, c'est qu'elle n'est jamais finie" (Flaubert 1980: 364).

<sup>11\*</sup> "Mon travail va bien lentement; j'éprouve quelquefois des *tortures véritable* pour écrire la phrase la plus simple" (Flaubert 1980: 175).

gling for the perfect wording, fearing mistakes, starting late, problematic planning of the writing (Keseling 2004: 111ff). At least the first four points adequately represent Flaubert's writing processes. Following Keseling, Flaubert presumably faces a conflict with a destructive inner addressee. Keseling proposes possible strategies to achieve a release of this blockade: writing without breaks (118) and the replacement of the destructive addressee with another benevolent addressee (119).

What Keseling describes as a "blockade" that has to be overcome with the help of a strategy, is referred to as a writing strategy by Ortner. He attributes it to the type of the syncretistic step-by-step writer (cf. Ortner 2000) who permanently edits, crafts his phrases slowly, prepares carefully (i.e. researches a lot) and works on multiple passages at once.

When writing is understood as a basically problematic process there is *only* strategic writing and the term *writing problem* becomes obsolete. The concept of the blockade already implicates an ideal natural flow of writing, which is mostly ascribed to great writers. Flaubert's account of his writing experiences may serve as an example that reveals that this understanding of writing is a distorted image.

In contrast to the usual metaphor of a natural watery work-flow, Flaubert's *metawriting* produces an image that is marked by a striking lack of water. Flaubert speaks of an endless desert of pages covered in letters that he has to cross. "I do not expect any more of my life than a series of paper sheets that are to be stained. It seems to me that I am crossing a wasteland without end, to go I do not know where, and that I am at one the desert, the voyager and the camel."<sup>12</sup> The camel is the voyager adapted to the desert. As such, it is the life form that has learned not to count on floods and flows but yet still crosses the wasteland and survives - with the help of survival strategies. Maybe this can serve as a guideline in academic writing. We all have to face the desert and it is futile to blame yourself as a camel for the lack of water. I would like to conclude with a

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<sup>12\*</sup> "Je n'attends plus rien de la vie qu'une suite de feuilles de papier à barbouiller de noir. Il me semble que je traverse une solitude sans fin, pour aller je ne sais où, et c'est moi qui suis tout à la fois le désert, le voyageur, et le chameau." (Flaubert 1998: 916).

quote by another master of modern literature, Samuel Beckett: "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." (Beckett 1996: 89).

## Letters and Lectures II: Standing in the laboratory with Kleist

♣ Sebastian Schönbeck

### Reading, thinking, writing

Like every genre the Essay has a history, and when we (as readers and writers) are reading Heinrich von Kleists *On the gradual production of thoughts whilst speaking*<sup>13</sup> (Kleist, 2004, 404-409; Kleist, 1984, 319-324) and once we are writing about it, what does that mean? When we are writing a text like now, we are reflecting about our previous readings of literary texts (in English which is not necessarily our mother tongue), about letters and lectures so that this could be as well a performance or a theatre piece: writing about readings of texts which are written black on white. In the following Essay I would like to read, think and write about this Essay by Kleist and I would like to think about the history of the genre of the Essay that the Essay by Kleist calls to mind. First I would like to ask: What is an Essay? In a second step I would like to do a close reading of the Essay by Kleist and in the final part, I would like to argue that the Essay, as well as the letter, is a predestinated genre to think and to reflect about the writing process. Literature (and this is our thesis) teaches us about writing and to think about its composition.

### An Essay is an Essay?

Every essay has to interest academic writers and academic teachers because the essay is in every respect a special genre. Students ask themselves very often: "What is an essay? What does it mean to write an essay?" They say: "My teacher told me to write an essay but I don't know what he thinks about the essay? So what is an essay?" The essay as a contemporary academic form is like an enig-

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<sup>13</sup>Original: *Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden.*

matic sphinx. It may provide hundreds of different answers to the same question: So what is an essay? The word originates in the Latin word *exagium*, which means to weigh, to measure, to appetite (Ostermann 1994: 1460). Every definition of the essay is a performance of itself, one cannot say what it is but celebrate it: It "celebrates the message" (Černý 1991: 747). It keeps in the title the method of itself, exposes and hides in its content the traces of its composition. In the past the genre became common at the exact moment, when philosophical terms turned out to be problematic. For Montaigne the essay was a means to express his skepticism.

The historic dictionary of philosophy<sup>14</sup> quotes Bacon, who says: "The word [Essay] is late but the thing is ancient: for Seneca's Epistles to Lucilius . . . are *Essaies*, that is dispersed Meditations" (746). The classical sources are the dialogue, the letter, and the aphorism. The contemporary instinctive comprehension is: experiment, fragment, discourse, paper, attempt. But every time we write an essay, we refer to this long history, and every time we try to say what an essay is, we create a *pastiche* or *palimpsest* of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), who are the two fathers of the genre. In the beginning the essay is not a European phenomenon. This genre did not reach Germany before the 18th century with Lessing, Herder and (this is part of my thesis) with Kleist. A great number of scientific publications show how complex and how difficult it is to define the essay, even if we know the sources of this common scientific genre which we all have to write. The essay is situated somewhere between scientific and literary writing.

### **Lamplight: The laboratory**

Essays, as in the case of Kleist, are like stills of the writing process, of thoughts, of words, of arguments. *On the gradual production of thoughts whilst speaking* performs, how close the essay is to the dialogue or the letter: This fact is highlighted by the address, the letters RvL.<sup>15</sup> They ask the reader to reveal how productive it is

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<sup>14</sup>Ritter Joachim [Ed.], *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (HWPh), Darmstadt: WBG 1971-2007.

<sup>15</sup>The English translation of the addresses fails the origin: It translates "Für Rühle von Lilienstern", while the origin contains only the initials AvR. At the same time the origin begins with the preposition "An", which appears as an



to talk about and to reflect on thoughts, to address thoughts, and words: written and spoken ones. In the first sentence the text exposes the importance of the advice. Anymore than this, the text itself is an advice to the reader, in the case one cannot find knowledge: "If there is something you wish to know and by meditation you cannot find, my advice to you, my ingenious old friend, is: speak about it [...]"<sup>16</sup> (Kleist 2004: 405) to anybody, with *n'importe qui*. It's worth to take notice of the fact that the thought is not ready in the beginning of a speech, because what - you "wish to know" - comes "whilst speaking", only comes within the speech, in the act of reflective speaking.

Kleist's essay quotes or parodies Rabelais's famous *topos*: "L'idée vient en mangeant." (Ibid, 405) The modified version is - in French words: "L'idée vient en parlant."<sup>17</sup> The idea comes simultaneously to the speech or to the conversation. Kleist's text tries to provide an answer to the epistemological question of how it is possible to find thoughts which are hidden in the moment the thinker looks for them. The main assumption of the text is the method of Maieutics, "what Kant calls midwifery of thinking"<sup>18</sup> (Ibid, 409): "I believe many a great speaker to have been ignorant when he opened his mouth of what he was going to say."<sup>19</sup> (Ibid, 406)

The research on Kleist has already remarked that some of the texts of Kleist are essays, that Kleist is influenced by Rousseau and therefore by Montaigne. (cf. Moser, 2000; Schlüter, 1987) Even the Kleist Handbook (Riedl 2009: 150) underlines the relation to Montaigne, so that it comes as no surprise, that the English edition of Kleist's works translates the shorter prose with: essays. The body of the text itself is, in contrast to the idea of the immediacy of speech, strictly structured. There is a tension between the text

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addressing, while the English "For" is more a dedication.

<sup>16</sup>"Wenn du etwas wissen willst und es durch Meditation nicht finden kannst, so rate ich dir, mein lieber, sinnreicher Freund, mit dem nächsten Bekannten, der dir aufstößt, darüber zu sprechen." (Kleist 1984: 319)

<sup>17</sup>"*l'appétit vient en mangeant* - < Der Appetit kommt beim Essen > (nach Rabelais < Gargantua >); *l'idée vient en parlant* - Kleists Umbildung: < Der Gedanke kommt beim Sprechen >." (Ibid, 925)

<sup>18</sup>"[Die] Hebammenkunst der Gedanken, wie sie Kant nennt [...]." (Ibid, 324)

<sup>19</sup>"Ich glaube, daß mancher große Redner, in dem Augenblick, da er den Mund aufmachte, noch nicht wußte, was er sagen würde." (Ibid, 320)

and its messages, the messages accentuate the flow of thoughts. In contrast the text is a well designed - and therefore in a way frozen - test arrangement of quotations. We can divide the body of the text into six different examples, like the Kleist Handbook does, and into three groups. (Kleist 2004: 150) The first group contains two examples. Both describe a dual conversation between people who know each other very well. In the first example it is the sister who is sitting behind the speaker in his office which seems to be a form of a thinking-laboratory and the second is the maidservant of Molière. Both dialogue partners are passive, and non-directive advisers. Their very mere presence helps the speaker understand "as [his] speech proceeds." (Ibid, 406) The monologue within this dialogue is the "workshop of the mind" (Ibid), which leads the speaker to his thought. In the beginning of the Essay Kleist recommends "to gaze into a lamplight"<sup>20</sup> (Ibid, 405) when you look for something you cannot find. When we enter the *bureau* of Kleist, when we stare into his lamplight, we stand in the laboratory of writing: In his writing center and, at the same time, in our writing center.

The third and the fourth example of the essay are famous ones: The first is a quotation by the French revolutionist Mirabeau, who did not know, in the moment he opened his mouth, what he was going to revolutionize with his words. The second example is as complicated as the first, it comes from the fable *Les animaux malades de la peste* of Jean de la Fontaine. When the Essay of Kleist quotes the famous fable of La Fontaine, he underlines the complexity of the writing process and the difficulties in the work with quotations: 'Sire', says the fox, wishing to ward the lightning off himself, [...]"<sup>21</sup> On the one hand we find an anthropomorphism which in-

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<sup>20</sup>"Ich pflege dann gewöhnlich ins Licht zu sehen, als in den hellsten Punkt, bei dem Bestreben, in welchem mein innerstes Wesen begriffen ist, sich aufzuklären. (Ibid, 319) One can read the light as a metaphor for truth. (cf. Blumenberg 2001: 139-171)

<sup>21</sup>The whole sentence: 'Sire' says the fox, wishing to ward the lightning off himself, 'in your zeal and generosity you have gone too far. What if you have done a sheep or two to death? Or a dog, a vile creature? And: quant au berger,' he continues, for this is the chief point, 'on peut dire,' though he still does not know what, 'qu'il méritoit tout mal,' trusting to luck, and with that he has embroiled himself, 'étant,' a poor word but which buys him time, 'de ces gens là', and only now does he hit upon the thought that gets him out of his difficulty,

dicates the naturalness of the writing process: As the speech of the animal shows - and of this the smart fox is a good example - how convincing a speech can be, especially when it is fabricated just in the speech act. On the other hand the example shows what a work with quotations can look like. Kleist's text is quoting the original in a wrong way, the text is rather literature than a scientific text (cf. Rohrwasser 1992: 153) but at least it shows that quotations are not self-evident, but must be paraphrased and the commentary the narrator looks through is that the fox and his rhetoric *finesse* "wishe[s] to ward the lightning off [...]." The reader of La Fontaine, in the present case, looks through the rhetoric fabrication of the speech of the fox, who wants to establish that the "bloodthirsty donkey" is the "most fitting sacrifice" (Kleist 2004: 407f.) to overcome the pest.

### Writing the 'Not-Yet-Knowing'

The last two examples are a conversation and an exam situation. The latter is especially interesting for ourselves as peer tutors, because it points to the difficulty of oral exams in a way which seems to be a paradox: Kleist's text advises the student to enter the exam with yet unfinished thoughts. If he repeats what he already knows his thoughts are only a defective copy: "For it is not we who know things but pre-eminently a certain condition of ours which knows."<sup>22</sup> (Ibid, 408) This correlation between knowing and not-knowing seems to be the main point of Kleist's essay. The act of writing, the writing process as well as the conversation about it, seem to work on this

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'qui sur les animaux se font un chimérique empire.' - And he goes on to proof that the donkey, the bloodthirsty donky (devourer of grass and plants) is the most fitting sacrifice [...]." (Kleist 2004: 407f.) Original: " < Sire >, sagt der Fuchs, der das Ungewitter von sich ableiten will, < Sie sind zu großmütig. Ihr edler Eifer führt Sie zu weit. Was ist es, ein Schaf erwürgen? Oder einen Hund, diese nichtswürdige Bestie? Und: quant au berger >, fährt er fohrt, denn dies ist der Hauptpunkt: < on peut dire >, obschon er noch nicht weiß was? < qu'il méritoit tout mal >, auf gut Glück; und somit ist er verwickelt; < étant >, eine schlechte Phrase, die ihm aber Zeit verschafft: < de ces gens là >, und nun erst findet er den Gedanken, der ihn aus der Not reißt: < qui sur les animaux se font un chimérique empire. > - Und jetzt beweist er, daß der Esel, der blutdürstige! (der alle Kräuter auffrißt) das zweckmäßigste Opfer sei [...]." (Kleist 1984: 322)

<sup>22</sup>"Denn nicht *wir* wissen, es ist allererst ein gewisser *Zustand* unsrer, welcher weiß." (Ibid, 323)

*liaison dangereuse* in general. Kleist's text tries to review his thesis in different examples, and tries to measure (*exagium*) it with different fictions, as it winds itself in various narratives. On this trial, he crosses diverse disciplines and detects that there is "[...]" a remarkable congruence between the phenomena of the physical world and those of the moral world "[...]"<sup>23</sup> (Kleist 2004: 407) One could add that his text testifies as well the coincidence of writing, reading and speaking. Every essay tries to contribute towards an answer to a question which was written on a bar in Montaigne's library: "Que sais-je?" (Rohner 1966: 26). To write essays and to talk about their composition belong to the same process in which this knowledge can be generated: Literature is a place in which writers and readers can follow the gradual production of knowledge.

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<sup>23</sup>"Dies ist eine merkwürdige Übereinstimmung zwischen den Erscheinungen der physischen und der moralischen Welt [...]" (Kleist 1984: 321) Diderot keeps this idea in the following way: "Les grands poètes dramatiques surtout sont spectateurs assidus de ce qui se passe autour d'eux dans le monde physique et dans le monde moral." (Diderot 1935: 1008) Dt.: "Besonders die großen dramatischen Dichter sind eifrige Zuschauer alles dessen, was um sie herum in der physischen und moralischen Welt passiert." (Diderot 1967: 487)

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